

## **LIVING WITH GRIEF**

Grieving is a natural reaction to a death or other serious loss. Grief cannot be hurried. It takes a great deal of time to heal after losing a loved one.

Each grieving experience is unique. The following are stages of grief that are commonly experienced after a loss. You may not experience all of these, and you may not experience them in this order. There are many natural ways to grieve, as you move through grief to a better place. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a person will or should go through on the grief journey.

### **Shock**

*Many people first experience shock after a loss, saying things like "I feel numb" and showing no tears or emotions. Other people never go through a prolonged stage of shock. They are able to express emotions immediately. It is important to allow time for this process of coming to grips with loss to occur.*

### **Emotional Release**

At some point, you begin to accept what has happened to someone that you love and to hurt. It is very important not to deny or try to bury these feelings. Buried feelings can often surface at a later time in unhealthy ways.

### **Preoccupation with the Deceased or the Crisis**

Despite efforts to think of other things, you may find it difficult to shift your mind from thoughts about the deceased person. This is not unusual and usually gets easier with time.

### **Hostile Reactions**

You may catch yourself responding with a great deal of anger to situations that previously would not have bothered you. The feelings can be surprising and very uncomfortable. These feelings often make people feel that they are going crazy. Anger can be directed at the doctor, the nurse, God, sometimes even at your loved one who died.

Often, there may be feelings of hurt or hostility toward family members who do not or cannot provide the emotional support you may have expected from them. Anger and hostility are normal, and should be accepted as real. However, it is important to understand that the anger is actually about the loss of a loved one, more than any specific individual's actions.

### **Guilt**

There is almost always some sense of guilt with grief. We think of the many things we could have done, but didn't. We accuse ourselves of negligence. Guilt is normal and should be acknowledged as normal. Reassurance from others is seldom helpful, until we are ready to hear it.

### **Depression**

You may feel despair, loneliness and hopelessness; nothing seems worthwhile. These feelings may be even more intense if you live alone or have little family. When you are depressed, you often tend to withdraw from social relationships and daily routines. Life after a loss can seem like a bad

dream. This is normal. The respectful, persistent presence of other people will help us begin to reenter society.

### **Symptoms of Physical and Emotional Distress**

People feel grief in many ways, and at different times. Symptoms of distress may come in waves. The most common physical sign of distress are:

- Sleeplessness
- Tightness in the throat
- A choking feeling
- Shortness of breath
- An empty hollow feeling in the stomach
- Lack of muscular power (“It’s almost impossible to climb stairs” or “everything I lift seems heavy”)
- Digestive symptoms and poor appetite

Closely associated with the physical signs may be certain emotional symptoms. These emotional disturbances may be frightening, but they are actually quite normal, the most common of which are:

- A sense of unreality
- Feelings of emotional distance from people - that no one really cares or understands
- Feelings of panic, thoughts of self-destruction, or the desire to run away or hide.

### **The grieving process is influenced by many issues**

The impact of a death depends on a combination of factors including:

- Support from family, friends and/or community
- How, where and when the person died
- Your relationship with the person who died
- Your level of involvement in the dying process
- Your previous experiences with death

### **Living with grief**

We gradually learn to live with our losses. The memories are still there, the love is still there, but the wounds begin to heal, and we begin to get on with life. With patience and an acceptance of the grieving process as a necessary passage, and with support from those around us, we can resume our new lives.